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ABSTRACT

Much composition research, even qualitative research, posits a world "out there" waiting to be understood and seeks causes of phenomena without considering the subjective states of researchers or study participants. Because of this, many researchers consider social phenomena as "things" which coerce human behavior. But even considering this view, the uncovered reality is still an intentional reality because objects acquire structure and meaning through the involved, intentional conduct of researchers. By asking how the observer contributed to the creation of this meaning, it is possible to begin to understand the process by which actors establish meaning. Phenomenological philosophy has great implications for the ways research reports are read. If the world is created through human intentionality, both the writing and the reading of research reports add other layers of intentionality. Researchers need to recognize the fine line between objectively and subjectively studying phenomena, between describing reality and creating it, between recording data and telling stories. Researchers need to realize that their own subjectivity affects the design and analysis of even the most positivist research techniques. (Thirteen references are attached.) (SG)

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The Phenomenology of Research:
The Construction of Meaning in Data Anlysis

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Much composition research, even qualitative research, posits a world "out there" waiting to be understood and seeks causes of phenomena without considering the subjective states of researchers or study participants. Because of this, many researchers consider social phenomena as "things" which coerce human behavior (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 2). This "things-out-there-to-be-understood" attitude even affects much qualitative research. Supposedly, this objective distancing is the only way to understand "things."

But even when composition research is solely concerned with "things" which affect behavior or with a world which is "out there" waiting to be understood, the uncovered reality is still an intentional reality because objects acquire structure and meaning through the involved, intentional consciousness of researchers (Swingewood, 1984, p. 270). Instead of asking "What does the social world mean to me the observor?" researchers should be asking "What does the social world mean for the observed actor within this world?" and "How did I the observor contribute to the creation of this meaning?". By doing this, we can begin to understand the process by which actors establish meaning.

To further explore this concept, I want to briefly summarize the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, show how it might inform composition research, and discuss how phenomenology affects both design and analysis in context- based composition research.

Phenomenology as Philosophy

Husserl's phenomenological philosophy is based on the belief that reality is intentional, that humans direct their consciouness toward objects. The meaning of things, therefore, is not inherent in objects, but is actually located in the individual's inner life (Swingewood, 1984). We can never know what the world is truly like; we can only hope to know how we perceive of the world. Since meaning is always in the subject, not in the object, objective understanding is impossible. To phenomenology, then, we can never know what phenomena mean, only how someone interprets those phenomena.

We can, however, attempt to understand objects as they are initially experienced before our cultural filters have affected our understanding, a process which Husserl described as getting "back to things," examining how objects directly appear to us. We cannot assume that objects are as we have been taught to assume they are (Wolf, 1978, p. 501). Phenomenology is the attempt to

understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual's consciousness, to get at the interrelationship between life and the world (Phillipson, 1972), to understand how phenomena interact with the way humans actually live in the world.

Alfred Schutz extended Husserl's philosophical concepts to sociological research, saying that the researcher's task is to understand reality as it is actively and consciously constructed by subjects, not as a pure entity which exists "out there" (Swingewood, 1984). As Schutz explains: "The everyday world is a world of intersubjective culture. Its intersubjectivity comes from being bound to others through common influence and work, understanding others and being understood by others.... The relation to others obtains its meaning only in reference to the individual" (1978, pp. 134-135).

For Schutz, then, meaning is not waiting passively to be discovered by humans, but is actively constructed by them through a structure of multiple realities which are made meaningful through language, rules, roles, and statuses (Swingewood, 1984). The phenomenological researcher tries to discover how meaning is constructed, not the structure of meaning. The major impact of this philosophy is to make individuals--both subjects and

researchers-- and their perceptions of the world around them central to the research process.

An individual's experience and knowledge of the world come only from actively "being" in the world. It is this "being" which makes consciousness--the act of being simultaneously in touch with the world and with ourselves-- possible in all its forms.

These conceptions of consciousness blur the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. As Merleau-Ponty has expressed it, humans are not merely the meeting point of numerous causal agencies. All our knowledge of the world, even scientific knowledge, is obtained from one particular point of view, or from some experience of the world (Phillipson, 1972, p. 123). Seen from this phenomenological perspective, people relate to the world through intentional experience with phenomena; phenomena, therefore, can only be understood under the conditions through which they are first encountered and experienced (Colaizzi, 1973).

Phenomenology as Methodology

Phenomenology, therefore, provides a philosophical perspective for understanding and completing composition research. In designing research, phenomenology suggests we try to understand the ordinary world not by examining

its structure, but by accounting for the ways individuals define and reflect upon situations and actions. Phenomenology suggests that we not reduce subjects to isolated variables or to mere members of a culture but allow researchers to study people as they define and first experience abstract concepts (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975).

Because phenomenological research and ethnography are related and confused (North [1987], for example, interchanges the terms; and Geertz [1973] clearly establishes a phenomenological basis for ethnography), it is important to note the differences. Basically, ethnography studies the seen-but-unnoticed rules people use to survive in cultures. Ethnography seeks to discover the cultural knowledge people use in life and with the "development of theories of culture" (Germain, 1986, p. 147) through careful description and analysis of aspects of a particular culture's way of life (Saville-Troike, 1982). Clearly, the emphasis is on cultural and communital knowledge. Phenomenology, on the other hand, studies how people actively and cooperatively construct the cultures they take part in (Van Manen, 1978), focusing on the individual. Phenomenology attempts to forage through the layers of lived experience and cultural knowledge in order to rediscover experience

before knowledge and beliefs are used to make a new sense out of experience (Oiler, 1983, p. 72). Instead of focusing on culture, phenomenology focuses on people living experiences. Instead of studying theories of culture, phenomenology attempts to disrupt, to briefly set aside these cultural links so that a phenomenon can be described as it is initially experienced.

For example, ethnography would be a valuable research technique for understanding various discourse communities to which students belong because it would emphasize the cultural boundaries of those communities. It would not, however, help us understand the individual experience of taking up membership in a new discourse community, an understanding which would have important pedagogical implications. Phenomenology, on the other hand, attempts to bypass the cultural and focus on the individual experience.

Phenomenology suggests that we must first understand what the observed world means to the observed actors. Instead of merely collecting facts or regularities which lead to fundamental assumptions about the world, we must understand the facts within the scheme of human motives, means and ends, planning, and actions.

Phenomenology and Data Understanding

Obviously, phenomenoligcal philosophy is also an important consideration in the analysis of data collected during any research project, no matter what the design. Because phenomenology suggests that objective understanding is impossible and that all meaning is actually located in the humanness of the observer, not in the observed phenomena, the philosophy has major implications for our understanding of data analysis.

Phenomenology suggests that researchers have to understand that their research projects allow them to understand understanding, not reality. During project design, researchers have to acknowledge that their research is an attempt to understand something which exists because of their research. Composing processes, for example, do not necessarily exist because writers rely on them; composing processes exist because researchers made them exist through their research. Obviously, writers follow some process; but it is a human concept which suggests that the processes are quanitifiable and regular. The object is made to exist and is defined by the researcher's subjective interest in it. Phenomenologically, then, researchers can expect to

discover whatever it is they set out to discover because the researched phenomena becomes an intentional reality.

Phenomenology would also suggest that researchers' conclusions--even in the most positivistic research-- are not objective descriptions of objective realities, of a world that was out there waiting to be discovered. Instead, researchers' conclusions are descriptions of their own constructions of reality. As soon as researchers begin to describe, they create whatever they are describing. Phenomenologically, everyone --researchers included-- constructs the world through descriptions of perceptions; people do not understand an objective world through their observations; the reality is created as it is described by the observor.

Obviously, phenomenological philosophy also has great implications for the ways we read research reports. If the world is created through human intentionality, then so too are research projects. The writing of the project adds an additional layer of human intentionality to the process, and the reading of the written report eventually adds other layers as well. In an ethnography, for example, first the subject understands the culture, then interprets that understanding in an explanation for a researcher. The researcher, in turn, understands the account and then interprets the understanding into a

written text. Finally, the reader reinterprets the written text, bringing her own intentionality to it. By the time a research report is read, therefore, the original subject's understanding of his culture has been changed through a series of phenomenological transitions, and information can be gained or lost through each of these transformations (Reinharz, 1983).

Conclusion

Perhaps phenomenological philosophy is wrong. Perhaps we can access an objective reality. But even if we do possess that ability--and phenomonologists would argue that we couldn't know it even if we do--researchers need to recognize the fine line between objectively and subjectively studying phenomena, between describing reality and creating it, between recording data and telling stories. Reserchers need to realize that their own subjectivity affects the design and analysis even the most positivist research techniques.

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